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Features

A timely return to US

By Zul-Fakhri Maidy in Columbia, Missouri



Fulbright scholars at the Memorial Stadium in Lincoln, Nebraska.



A seminar in progress. - PHOTOS: ZUL-FAKHRI MAIDY



Students on an excursion in downtown Lincoln, Nebraska.

The closing words in my article "A Taste of the Big Apple" published in November last year stated that I wondered if I'd someday return to the United States, a vast country which I grew to like during my semester there in 1999. I also said somehow I felt my question would soon be answered. Well, now I'm here again, albeit in a different state and under completely different but nonetheless equally exciting circumstances.

A number of articles in previous years have described the Fulbright Gateway Orientation programme in full detail, thanks to my three fellow Brunei Fulbright scholars. My orientation was held in similar fashion at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the organisers were absolutely thrilled at the chance of welcoming the latest member of the Brunei contingent.

The purpose of my being here in the US: to study and complete a full-time two-year MA in Journalism programme at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

In the interests of enabling readers to feel like they're part of my experiences, and for aficionados of Geography (one of my favourite subjects), I shall include coordinates of some of the locations that I have been to, so readers can look them up online via

specialised websites.

I arrived in Lincoln, Nebraska just after midnight local time on Saturday, July 28, 2007, after a smooth long-haul journey from Brunei via Singapore, Hong Kong and Chicago - my first flight across the Pacific. I was received on arrival at the Kauffman Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln (4049'11"N, 9642'01"W), by Darlene Esser and Julie Crocker, members of the organising committee for the Fulbright Gateway Orientation programme.

I was particularly happy with the good treatment I had received from everyone I encountered and interacted with throughout my 24-hour travelling adventure. Even the immigration and customs officers were almost cordial in nature at Chicago O'Hare - my port of entry to the US - thanks to the impeccable preparation of my travel documents by the US Embassy in Brunei. After I answered all the necessary questions accurately and without hesitation, the immigration officer looked above the rim of her glasses, smiling, and said:

"You've been here before, haven't you?" Politely I replied, "Yes ma'am I have, New York in '99, through JFK."

She smiled, nodded and officially approved my second-ever entry to the US. "Welcome back to the United States, and have a nice day," she said.

In another impromptu welcome gesture, an American family helped to carry some of my heavy luggage on and off the skytrain during my transfer between terminals to catch my connecting flight to Omaha, Nebraska. I made sure I thanked each and every one of them properly before we parted ways. Some brief encounters could be the sweetest.

After 20 hours of flying and four airports, the necessary procedure of taking off my shoes, belt and watch for a metal detector and taking out my laptop for X-ray clearance felt like a dance routine I had just perfected.

Looking back, I feel highly privileged to have rubbed shoulders with my counterparts from all around the world. The 2007 Fulbright Gateway Orientation programme proved succesful in serving as a platform for cultural exchange, international relations as well as leadership development and practice.

Organised with the aim of helping to introduce the USA to new Fulbright scholars, the weeklong orientation programme featured a host of inciteful seminars, practical workshops and constructive activities that would help Fulbrighters prepare for life at their respective institutions.

One of the most memorable events was the 'homestay programme' in which scholars would stay with American foster families throughout the state of Nebraska and also visit several places of interest in the respective localities. The 43 Fulbright scholars were divided into seven groups of six or seven, with each group being brought to a particular town. I and five other Fulbrighters went to a town called Beatrice (4016'N, 9645'W), where we were received by a group of highly enthusiastic people who were to be our hosts and foster parents for the next 24 hours.

It was funny how a local reporter in Beatrice was able to pick me - an employee of the Borneo Bulletin - out from the group of six international students during a welcoming dinner. She interviewed me on my path towards winning the Fulbright

scholarship in Brunei, on my experiences in Nebraska as well as my future aspirations. The conversation itself was intriguing as, despite the fact that we had never previously met, we managed to cover a great deal of information in such a short space of time. Birds of a feather exemplified.

Besides staying over at our respective foster parents' homes - which I and my new friend Kiero Guerra from the Dominican Republic thoroughly enjoyed - we were also taken on a historic tour of the town and several other places of interest.

The visits gave us the opportunity to experience and appreciate the pleasant side of American life that we would otherwise never have experienced. What thrilled me the most was that the lifestyles in this part of the world were not too different from those of families in Brunei. In a way it also brought me closer to home. When our foster parents gave us the chance to choose our rooms, I chose the room with a lot of family photos, as it reminded me of my wife Dk Rosanidah, our two daughters Zafeerah Humaira and Zahara Hariisah as well as my parents back home in Brunei.

Veteran homestay foster parent Dick Shasteen said he would normally go on fishing trips to a nearby lake on weekends with his sons, while another foster parent said he regularly plays golf. Dick, an established product procurement executive in his locality and honorary member of the Beatrice town council, also knew the names of all the prominent people the 2,000-strong townsfolk on a first name basis. Such an impressive mark of achievement was evident in our tours during which he would address everyone correctly by name.

Another highlight of the Fulbright orientation programme in Lincoln was a visit to the Memorial Stadium (4049'14"N, 9642'20"W), the official sporting grounds of the Nebraska Huskers, one of the biggest names in intercollegiate sports in the US and the pride of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The (American) football field was the venue of our group photo session. In an attempt to fully appreciate the love for the sport in the country, I took the opportunity to kick and pass a football around with my peers on the synthetic turf. It proved to be a real defining moment for me and my new friends.

The eventful week ended on Thursday with a banquet also attended by the university's academia as well as senior public figures in the state of Nebraska, during which all 43 students were awarded with certificates of participation.

On Friday, August 3, we all said our goodbyes to our friendly hosts as we headed out to our respective institutions throughout the US. The amicable departure signalled the start of a new adventure.

Next: Settling down in Missouri

